

“Yes, But Somebody Has to Help Them, Somehow:” Looking at the Italian Detention Field through the Eyes of Professional Nonstate Actors

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Abstract

Although migration-related detention has proliferated around the world, little is known about life inside these sites of confinement for illegalized non-citizens. Building on 34 months of fieldwork, this article examines the lived experiences of

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center staff and external civil-society actors engaged within Rome's detention center. We discuss the emotional, ethical, and political challenges faced by these professional actors in their everyday work and their relationship with detainees. Our aim is to shed light on psychosocial life in detention and the intersections between humanitarian and security logics in this setting. In doing so, we problematize the idea that "humanizing detention" can be a solution for change.

Keywords

migrant detention, lived experiences, humanitarian government, Italy, center staff, external civil-society actors

Introduction

In response to global movements of people, commonly portrayed as a threat to homeland security (Huysmans 2000), European countries and states of the Global North, in recent years, have drawn a complex geography of proliferating borders and strategies to contain, sort, and discipline "unruly" mobility (Tazzioli 2018). In doing so, as Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, such states have defined a regime of differential inclusion that by rearticulating echoes of colonialism and empire, sustains a racialized segmentation of society and differentiated access to labor markets and citizenship rights. Strengthening this argument, Golash-Boza (2015) asserts that the mobility management apparatus described earlier is part of a global cycle of neoliberal capitalism and that immigration law enforcement techniques like detention and deportation are part of a system of racialized and gendered social control that exposes particular groups of people to enhanced vulnerability and exploitation.

In Italy, the practice of confining people who fail to comply with immigration rules dates back to the late 1990s, when three emergency centers opened along the coast of Puglia (in Brindisi, Lecce, and Otranto) to respond to the so-called "Albanian emergency."¹ These centers were precursors to the contemporary Italian detention estate that was officially established in 1998 (Turco-Napolitano Law). Contrary to the United States and United Kingdom detention systems, whose management model is inspired by the national prison service (Bosworth and Turnbull 2015), in Italy the intertwining of police surveillance and humanitarian concerns has represented a key feature of this border control measure.² Not surprisingly, any

¹Starting in the early 1990s, ships from Albania landed on Italy's southern shores, carrying tens of thousands of people fleeing their country due to the turbulences of post-communist transformation (Esposito et al. 2015a).

²The numerous contestations around this practice raised by activists, jurists, and scholars played key roles in pushing the government to accentuate the humanitarian profile of newly opened detention facilities (Campesi 2015).³ We opt for the term 'illegalized' to underline

reference to “detention” has been avoided in the official lexicon, using instead the euphemism *trattenimento* (withholding) to refer to the confinement of “illegalized” people (Campesi 2015).³ More importantly, a specific characteristic of migration-related detention in Italy is the outsourcing of management and service provision to private entities, usually humanitarian organizations⁴ (Cadeddu 2013). This mechanism, which fits well within wider socio-economic trajectories of neoliberal structural adjustments that boost capital accumulation (Morris 2016) has also been fostered by the more recent entry of multinational companies into the Italian detention market, thanks to partnerships established with local humanitarian actors (Arbogast 2016). This evidence, in line with the global trend impelling the humanitarian world toward a neoliberal market logic (Agier 2011), speaks volumes about the business interests existing around detention in Italy (Esposito, Ornelas, and Arcidiacono 2015a; Napoli et al. 2019 and around the globe (Mountz et al. 2013).

Despite widespread concerns about the establishment of a global detention estate (e.g., UNHCR, 2014), little is known about life inside these sites of confinement or about the living experiences of people inside them (Bosworth 2014). In Italy, as in most countries, the scarcity of scholarly knowledge on this hidden world is primarily due to the difficulties of gaining permission to conduct research inside detention facilities (cf. Iyengar et al. 2012; Campesi 2015). Aiming to address this gap and to shine a light on the realities of Italian migration-related detention, this article focuses on the lived experiences of both staff working for the organizations that manage Rome’s Ponte Galeria detention center and other external actors carrying out activities at this site (rights advocates, volunteers from faith-based organizations [FBOs], and religious congregations, lawyers, and journalists).⁵ Our main goal is to unearth these actors’ perspectives, the challenges and struggles they encounter, the strategies they adopt, and the meaning they give to their everyday experiences, in an effort to better understand the intricacies of life in detention and the intersection between humanitarian and security logics in this context and in the immigration enforcement system more broadly.

By taking this angle, our aim is twofold. First, addressing Bosworth’s (2014) call for further research inside these institutions, we contribute to better understanding of

that these people (asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, visa over-stayers, stateless, etc.) are not inherently ‘illegal’ but rather legally produced as ‘illegal’ by states.

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⁴Between 1998 and 2000, the management of almost all Italian detention centers was outsourced to the Italian Red Cross (see https://www.camera.it/cartellecomuni/leg14/RapportoAttivitaCommissioni/commissioni/allegati/01/01_all_CorteC_2003.pdf).

⁵These data are part of a larger study on migration-related detention in Italy and Portugal, which was the first author’s doctoral project in community psychology.

the psychosocial and cultural world behind detention centers' gates. As we show, by looking at migration-related detention through the eyes of professional actors working in this field, a viewpoint only recently addressed by academic research (Hall 2010; Bosworth and Slade 2014; Fischer 2015; Puthooppambil, Ahlberg, and Bjerneld 2015), new insights can be generated concerning the tensions, complexities, and contradictions at stake in the detention setting and in the professionals' relationship migrants confined. Particularly these contradictions can be condensed into the ethical dilemma faced due to the urge to 'do good' in abject and constraining circumstances. Such a picture, we suggest, also reveals how hegemonic discourses and expectations about citizenship and migration, as well as racialized and gendered ideas of who is a worthy subject of empathy and compassion ("good" vs. "bad" migrants, "victims" vs. "criminals", "innocents" vs. "guilty") are upheld, (re)produced, and sometimes challenged in migration-related detention and what role humanitarian logic plays in this process.

This remark brings us to the second and main field to which we contribute in this article: the intersection between security and humanitarian logics under the framework of contemporary immigration laws and policies. While studies of the tension between control and assistance in the "global management" of people on the move have focused on refugee camps and reception centers (Harrel-Bond 2002; Agier 2011; Fassin 2012), more recently, the role of "humanitarian reason" itself (Fassin 2012) has been analyzed with respect to border control settings (Aas and Gundhus 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015). In similar fashion, the exploration of how humanitarian concerns—and, more broadly, what Ticktin (2011, p. 3) calls "regimes of care"—shape the materiality of life inside migration-related detention centers has emerged as a topic of inquiry (Campesi 2015; Fisher 2015). In such sites, quoting Fisher (2015, p. 603), the tension between repression and protection, care and control, is "part of the very organization of the institution" and assumes a radicalized form. This tension, and its complex implications, are well exemplified by the statement made by one participant in our study: "But somebody has to help them [detainees], somehow."

Following this line of argument, we contend that Italy is a meaningful case study, given the entanglement of security and humanitarian logics that has consistently characterized its policy regarding the confinement of illegalized migrants. More specifically, our research provides a starting point for problematizing the idea, advanced by some scholars (e.g., Mountz, 2003; Hall 2010; Hiemstra 2014), that transformative changes in the system of migration control can arise through the creation of intimate relationships of compassion in sites where the sovereign state's violence is enforced, such as detention centers. Instead, we suggest, humanizing detention, though possibly allowing improvements in the treatment of people behind the gates, does not question the oppressive order on which the detention system itself is based. As a result, humanitarian-based approaches that are not embedded in actions toward system-level change can contribute to the continuation of detention in insidious ways, serving to sugarcoat and normalize the violence of detention

systems in the eyes of the general public. More specifically, such approaches can foster what Ticktin (2011, 2016) and Fassin (2012) define as a politics of compassion that, while feeding a white western morality, maintains structural inequalities and global economic orders on which these inequalities are based.

To address the points described earlier, the article proceeds with a brief description of our research context, Rome's detention center, and a methodological note. This section is followed by discussion of our empirical findings, which are organized around two overarching themes ("emotional, ethical, and political challenges" and "relationship with detainees") and analyzed in relation to the two different groups of professionals that we interviewed (staff working for the managing agencies and external civil-society actors). A final section pulls together the continuities and discontinuities across participants' experiences and fleshes out the pitfalls of a humanitarian approach to detention so as to offer some conclusive remarks.

Researching Migration-Related Detention in Italy

At the time of writing (March 2020), there are eight migration-related detention centers (currently known as Centri di Permanenza per i Rimpatri-CPR [holding centers for removal]) operating in Italian territory, with Rome's center of Ponte Galeria being the largest.⁶ Opened in 1998, the Ponte Galeria detention center, previously used as a police complex, is composed of several buildings surrounded by high walls and fences. Permission to access the center is difficult to obtain, especially for research purposes. We managed to get long-term access, thanks to Francesca Esposito's previous experience as an advocate for detained women (Esposito 2017), as well as the propitious political moment in which our research began.⁷

Originally, the center included a male (up to 176 detainees) and a female living unit (up to 178 detainees). However, in December 2015, as a consequence of a protest following an episode of police violence toward a detainee,⁸ the male living unit was burned, and Ponte Galeria was transformed into an all-women detention center holding up to 125 women subject to detention orders (Commissione Straordinaria per la Tutela e la Promozione dei Diritti Umani 2017). The men's living unit

⁶ According to the recently approved Law no. 46, detention facilities will be established in each of the 20 Italian regions. For instance, in December 2019, a detention center was reopened at Gradisca d'Isonzo (Gorizia), and another one opened in Macomer (Nuoro) in January 2020. Other detention facilities are being prepared to become operational in the course of 2020 (i.e., in Milan, Modena and Oppido Mamertina).

⁷ In 2013, when permission to access the Ponte Galeria center was requested, the Interior Minister was keen to relaunch an image of an open and transparent Italian detention system, especially after the highly controversial Circular Order 1305 largely forbade independent actors from accessing detention sites (see also Campesi 2015).

⁸ See "Roma – Rivolta al CIE di Ponte Galeria," Hurriya (blog), December 11, 2015, <https://hurriya.noblogs.org/post/2015/12/11/roma-rivolta-al-cie-di-ponte-galeria/>.

re-opened in June 2019, this time with tightened security measures. As is the case for other Italian detention centers, Ponte Galeria management is typically entrusted, by means of a three-year contract, to a private sector organization charged with providing detainees with basic assistance (e.g., food, cleaning), psychosocial and medical care, legal advice, and cultural linguistic mediation. In the case of Rome's detention center, a consortium composed of an Italian cultural association and a French company leader in the prison industry service management won the public tender, assigned on the basis of the most financially advantageous bid,⁹ for management from 2014 to 2017 (while the research was carried out).

Center staff, balanced by gender, includes board members, administrative staff, linguistic cultural mediators, doctors and nurses, psychologists, social workers, legal advisors, and non-specialized staff workers. Alongside the managing agency, the police headquarter's immigration office is in charge of administrative functions, such as handling detainees' immigration cases, maintaining relationships with consular authorities, and implementing deportation decisions. They are also responsible for maintaining order and security inside the facility, which they ensure by means of an interforce security unit composed of personnel from the state police, the national gendarmerie (*Arma dei Carabinieri*), and the finance police. Military staff monitor internal and external areas. While lawyers can meet detainees daily in a designated area and within a given time slot, NGO advocates and volunteers of FBOs and religious congregations enter the Ponte Galeria center on a weekly basis to provide legal, psychosocial, or spiritual aid. In some cases, journalists and political delegations also have access to the detention facility. It is in this complex scenario, composed of a multitude of actors with at times competing or converging agendas, roles, and tasks, that our research took place.

Methodological Note

Informed by a justice-focused ecological perspective from community psychology that looks at the multiple person-environment interdependencies and the way justice shapes them (Esposito et al., 2019; Esposito, Ornelas, and Arcidiacono 2015b), our research draws on fieldwork conducted inside Rome's Ponte Galeria detention center between March 2014 and January 2017. In particular, Francesca Esposito spent 617 hours in the center, interviewing both detainees and professionals and participating in everyday institutional life (Esposito et al., 2019). The long time frame permitted the development of relationships with various actors and created a platform for identifying and discussing relevant themes to explore in the course of the

⁹See http://www.prefettura.it/FILES/allegatinews/1160/capitolato_appalto_approvato_D.M._21-11-2008.pdf. The consortium asked 28.8 euro per day per detainee, compared to 40.9 euro of the previous management. As a consequence of budget reduction, some services were cut, and several people lost their jobs.

study. A critical reflexive attitude was adopted as a general way of engaging with the research process (Esposito 2017).

While our claims are informed by the entire body of ethnographic data associated with this project, this article focuses specifically on field notes collected during participant observations, as well as on informal conversations and interviews conducted with center staff, external service providers, and other independent professionals.¹⁰ Interview participants (8 women and 6 men, age range 28-56 years) were selected based on the heterogeneity of their professional backgrounds, affiliations, roles, and experiences. Seven interviewees were employees of managing organizations (two board members, two linguistic cultural mediators, a staff worker, a psychologist, and a legal advisor), and the others were members of external entities (three human rights advocates, an FBO volunteer, and a volunteer from a religious congregation) or freelancers (a lawyer and a journalist). Before interviews, all participants signed an informed consent form.

Interviews, lasting between 23 and 86 minutes, were carried out in a conversational style and took place in a range of settings (interviewees' homes and workplaces, the detention facility, public areas). The interview protocol, set up during fieldwork, focused on participants' experience within Ponte Galeria. In particular, we explored the way in which interviewees perceived the detention environment and gave meaning to their experiences within it. Interviewees were also asked to describe daily life inside the center and to express their views about the detention system's operation. Opinions concerning priorities for change were further explored.

All interviews—which were conducted in Italian and translated into English by the authors—were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically analyzed, following the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two overarching themes emerged from this process: a) emotional, ethical, and political challenges and b) relationships with detainees. These themes were analyzed in relation to the two groups of participants (members of managing organizations (*center staff*) and external actors providing services (*external civil-society actors*)). We chose to organize our analysis in this way because of interviewees' different positionings vis-a-vis the detention system. Center staff were hired by the managing organizations and played crucial roles in the center's daily operation and, by extension, the detention and deportation regime. Moreover, spending many hours inside the center, these workers met detainees on a daily basis and participated consistently in their everyday lives in detention. In contrast, external civil-society actors entered the center once a week, or even more sporadically in the case of lawyers and journalists, and met detainees for a few hours at a time. Their involvement in the detention system was therefore reduced: their mandate was mainly to support detainees, although they did so in

¹⁰Interviews with professionals were conducted between September 2015 and January 2016. The majority of interviews (except for two) took place before the closing of the male living unit.

very different ways, ranging from providing spiritual and emotional support to challenging detainees' deportation orders before court. The results of our analysis are described further.

Results

Emotional, Ethical, and Political Challenges

This section analyzes the emotional and ethical challenges that both center staff and external civil-society actors navigated in their activities at Ponte Galeria. In their accounts, these two groups described their professional self-conceptions, the goals and principles that guided their daily practice, and the strategies they adopted to carry out their work and to make sense and justify their experiences on ethical grounds. All professionals highlighted the constraints, conflicts, and difficulties with which they struggled—in particular the ethical dilemma of being complicit in this oppressive structure on one hand, while, on the other hand, recognizing that their presence could make a difference for those subjected to this structure as long as it existed. These challenges and dilemmas, related to the articulation of a humanitarian logic in a coercive site, caused professionals significant distress.

Center Staff

In interviews and informal conversations, staff members usually described themselves as practitioners devoted to assisting “vulnerable others”, perceiving “assistance”, and “help” as core values of their mission. Nevertheless, these humanitarian values were overtly in contrast to the detention system's coercive nature, mainly shaped by the police's securitarian approach. As a result, tension between “assistance” and “control”, “care” and “surveillance”, and “protection” and “repression” was constantly present in their narratives.

“I come from the non-profit culture,” a staff member emphasized while introducing himself, “from [the culture of] solidarity” (Male legal advisor). Then, he narrated his history as a social volunteer, linking it to the humanitarian philosophy of Ponte Galeria's managing agencies. His perspective was not an isolated one. Most staff members acknowledged detention's harshness (e.g., its excessive length of confinement, lack of activities, and poor living conditions), while also questioning its fairness and effectiveness in fulfilling its official mission (i.e., the removal of illegalized migrants). A few participants were even in favor of closing detention institutions or, remarkably, in favor of abolishing border control in general. Overall, and regardless of their opinions about the detention and deportation system, most staff members we met understood themselves to be humanitarian links, whose ultimate goal was to make detainees' imprisonment more bearable and to uphold their fundamental rights. Yet, this job was regarded as a strictly professional one:

Making care a profession inevitably gives you more responsibility for what you are doing Our approach is that within the CIE [*Center for Identification and Expulsion, the name of Italian detention centers before February 2017*] we are, let's say . . . we are the last or the most important presidium of fundamental rights. (Male board member)

Their humanitarian mission, condensed in the idea of standing “shoulder to shoulder” with detainees, was usually described as filled with a sense of responsibility toward detainees (to be assisted in their basic needs) and, sometimes, toward the Italian state. In these cases, staff members drew on a rhetoric of Italy as “a democratic country,” whose public image had to be preserved and promoted, to legitimize their work. However, such rhetoric ended up reproducing a differentiation between a “civilized us” and an “animalized other,” echoing and rearticulating colonial discourses celebrating white western moral superiority (on this point, see Fanon 1961):

You have to try to treat people in the most humane way possible, I mean, we call ourselves a democratic country, a developed one [*evoluto*]. Many times, I've heard discourses of the like: “What about your [referring to detainees'] country? They treat you like a dog.” Okay, it's probably true, but we claim to be better than them, so to speak, let's show it then. (Female psychologist)

Staff members also took on the task of processing migrants when they arrived, escorted by police officers, at Ponte Galeria and explaining to them, sometimes for the first time, what this place was and what could come next. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of calming detainees down and, above all, of reassuring them that “in spite of being in a place with bars” (Female linguistic cultural mediator), there was someone there caring for their wellbeing (similar evidence was found by Campesi [2015] inside Bari's detention center). Many migrants, indeed, were upset by the center's prison-like aspect and struggled to make sense of what was happening. As a result, staff members' jobs often required them to “clear up” this confusion and to convince detainees that they were not being imprisoned:

No, it's not a prison. [The detainee] comes to know that it is not a prison. It is a reception center; they are accommodated here to be identified and to find out, let's say, what is their name, the surname, the country of origin. (Male legal advisor)

In pursuing this intrinsically paradoxical goal, staff members often referred to Ponte Galeria as a “reception center” and described detainees as “guests” [*ospiti*] or alternatively “guys” [*ragazzi*]. In doing so, they made evident the ambivalence associated with their professional mandate and with the ambit of the place in which they operated. Due to the ambiguity around the center staff's humanitarian role, as well as the heated debate around the legitimacy of migrant detention itself in Italy (e.g., di Martino 2012; Santoro 2019), staff members also displayed concern about how people from outside saw them. They mentioned feeling constantly under

scrutiny and apprehensive that their actions could be misunderstood or instrumentalized by journalists and political actors. In particular, they complained about how media reports often portrayed them as “guards” holding detainees on behalf of state authorities. The metaphor of the concentration camp was frequently used in public debates to highlight the pains of detention, as a staff member explained:

I mean, if you read the newspapers, “the concentration camp,” “CIE of Ponte Galeria concentration camp,” and so on, and you come here with the idea that . . . you are coming to save the world from the evil, looking down on us without even trying to understand. (Female cultural mediator)

As a result, these workers’ attitude toward outsiders was one of suspicion. They mainly saw rights advocates, journalists, political delegations, and visitors as “intruders” who entered the center to criticize them and were a priori critical toward detention itself. In particular, they expressed critical views about anti-detention activists. “It is easier to stay out and criticize rather than entering to assist those in need,” some staff members claimed. Their main argument was that protests organized by activists outside the detention center “had ideology” (i.e., contesting the border regime) but did not “achieve tangible results.” In contrast, the staff saw itself as making a difference. Despite the emotional cost of being in touch with human suffering, they opted to stay inside to improve detainees’ situation or, at least, to alleviate their distress. Thus, staff members claimed, their decision, contrary to activists’ argument, should be understood as a sign of courage. “We must have the courage to stay inside,” a female board member explained, “because there must be someone here for them . . . They are there, and who helps them?”

In spite of their humanitarian concerns, center staff’s work was subject to strong constraints. Beyond practical restrictions, such as security provisions that drastically reduced the activities that could be developed, the main limitation concerned the custodial nature of the context itself (see also Campesi 2015, Kotsioni 2016). Providing assistance to people whose primary source of suffering was the very structural condition to which they were exposed (i.e., detention) had the de-facto effect of limiting the effectiveness of staff members’ interventions:

It’s not easy because you realize that, even if you want to provide a dignified assistance in that moment, the limits you have . . . are actually so many, and, however, what they [detainees] are looking for . . . they are obviously looking for freedom. (Female board member)

Staff members, thus, felt they had “their hands tied” (male staff worker). Despite staff’s “frontline position”, the power concerning detainees’ immigration cases was in the hand of state authorities, namely, immigration officers and judges. As a result, these workers had to deal with people’s anger and affliction on a daily basis, without the power to do anything about it. This situation, which gave rise to a widespread sense of powerlessness and frustration among staff members was further

complicated by the emotional connectedness that, at times, could be established with detainees (see the section “Relationship with detainees”).

This complex and fraught scenario resulted in a significant burden on staff members, who often reported feeling physically and emotionally exhausted (see also Campesi 2015; Puthoopparambil, Ahlberg, and Bjerneld 2015) and mentioned symptoms such as nightmares or excessive crying. The distress of being in contact with detainees’ suffering was worsened by the lack of psychological supervision or possibility of sharing feelings with colleagues in dedicated spaces. As a result, staff often questioned themselves about their roles:

I mean, you think, “Yes, but somebody has to help them, somehow” . . . but at the same time, you know that you cannot, somehow, fulfill what is your actual mission Somehow, you get like stuck in this situation between saying, “Well, however, they should be helped” yes, however, the context is so institutionalized and chronically set up, a mandate in which you cannot interfere too much. (Female board member)

To deal with the emotional plight of such paradoxes and dilemmas and to make sense of their roles, center staff relied on various strategies. For instance, some emphasized the idea that even if detention was not an optimal solution, “while CIEs exist, it is better that there is someone who manages them with a spirit of interest and humanitarian attention to detainees’ needs” (male board member). The urge to “do good” in such abject and constraining circumstances, clearly expressed by the phrase, “Yes, but somebody has to help them, somehow,” was the justification usually put forward. Another mechanism staff members used to make their work “workable” was framing detention as something established by law and attributing one’s own actions to regulations provided by authorities, as has been documented in studies of detention and deportation staff in other countries as well (e.g., Puthoopparambil, Ahlberg and Bjerneld 2015; Kalir and Wissink, 2016). As a male staff worker put it, “So is the law—the Italian law is that, you cannot do anything because we are not the ones to change the law or fight with this law; the only thing we have to do is to contribute.” In the face of this sense of powerlessness, *I do what is possible* ultimately became the rule of action for these workers who, after all, had to secure their jobs and bring a salary home.

External Civil-Society Actors

External actors also talked about the tensions and dilemmas associated with working in a custodial site like Ponte Galeria. Although they were generally critical of detention, in some cases manifesting overtly abolitionist positions¹¹, these

¹¹ The use of the term “abolitionist position” refers to the attitude of favoring the end of migration-related detention and the closure of all detention facilities.

professionals chose to enter such an oppressive institution. In doing so, their main purpose was both “getting to know a reality [often denied to the larger public]” (male FBO volunteer) and “providing a platform for giving voice to stories that often remained submerged” (female rights advocate working with women detainees).

While journalists focused on narrating detention conditions and the violations taking place inside this realm, the rest of these actors were engaged in providing detainees with various forms of aid (i.e., legal, psychosocial, and/or moral). Many, as affirmed by both rights advocates and the lawyer we interviewed, understood their mission to be a political one. As the latter claimed, “my commitment has a different value. It’s more like a [political] activism.” Making use of existing tools within the state’s legal framework, they strove for the recognition of detainees’ rights, such as the right to health and protection, but also the right to freedom and a life lived free from the risk of deportation. In particular, rights advocates denounced cases of violations and abuses to media and political representatives, while also compiling reports and participating in public campaigns on detention. An articulation between individual responses to detainees (e.g., challenging their expulsion orders before court) and working toward changing the system and its rules was present in their accounts, constituting the essence of their social justice work at Ponte Galeria:

We have always juxtaposed the activity with women [the interviewee’s NGO ran a counseling service for detained women who were victims of gender violence] with political activity because even if we can help some women at a level, at an individual level, let’s say, the political level is what needs to be addressed when the laws . . . show a strong gap with respect to the real lives of women So there is a whole militant political activity, which . . . is necessary. (Female rights advocate)

In spite of their common commitment to social justice, these actors were also motivated by different missions and political stances toward the detention and deportation system. Radical ones claimed that not only should detention be abolished, but the whole system of border control should be rethought as well, in order to guarantee freedom of movement for all. Other interviewees manifested more cautious positions that varied from identifying the breaking down of the detention system as an ultimate goal to be eventually achieved through progressive advancements (e.g., reducing detention length and applying this measure to residual cases) to concentrating their efforts on limiting the use of detention and improving conditions.

One particular case was that of volunteers from FBOs and religious congregations. Although they had different backgrounds and carried out distinct activities, including offering socio-legal counseling and Italian classes, performing religious ceremonies, and running an assisted voluntary return project directed at Nigerian

women,¹² these actors spoke of their work's importance in providing aid to detainees but, foremost, in listening and offering them friendship, advice, care, and moral and spiritual support. In doing so, these actors emphasized the importance of establishing connections as a means "to humanize detainees' experiences" and "restore their dignity" (male FBO volunteer). In line with their mission, these interviewees demonstrated a generally less progressive stance toward the detention system, especially in comparison with rights advocates. For example, in their interviews, they expressed a vision that was less concerned with changing structural dimensions and more focused on reforming the function of Ponte Galeria and detention centers in general, in order to adequately address detainees' individual needs:

Well, I believe that inside the CIE, there is a desire that arises among everyone [detainees], which is to find one's life path. I would like the CIE to be, paradoxically, more like a place where one can find their way back. The CIE . . . does not offer assistance to those who want to leave, and; therefore, it does not convince those who could find a future in their own country to leave, nor does it provide any prospects of a dignified permanence to those who will not leave. (Male FBO volunteer)

While displaying passion and energy for their work, all external civil-society actors mentioned challenges and difficulties they faced at various levels. First, they highlighted the tight institutional constraints that limited their activity, which included restricted access to the facility (usually limited to one day per week) and to detainees (access to the male living unit was usually granted only with a security escort). Moreover, they emphasized the lack of information concerning the situation inside the center and detainees' individual cases, as well as the lack of collaboration on the part of police and, in some cases, staff members. In particular, participants often reported a sense of mistrust and suspicion toward these institutional actors. As a male journalist explained, "I felt like entering into a system in which those who worked there had all the interest in hiding things."

If mistrust toward police officers was easily explained on the basis of their overtly competing agendas, views, and ideologies, relationships with center staff were more complex. As staff members, too, understood themselves as coming from a humanitarian background, external actors felt more proximity with them, at least partially, in terms of language, codes, and values. Moreover, staff members, having their fingers on the center's pulse, were the only ones on whom external actors could rely for information, such as on vulnerable cases. Therefore, it was through collaboration with center staff that external actors could often support detainees' claims and counteract violations and abuses. Yet the center staff's active role in managing the detention estate complicated the scenario, arousing conflicting feelings toward them:

¹²For a critical analysis of such programs, see Kalir 2017.

CIEs will exist as long as there will be co-ops, managing agencies, willing to . . . - manage them I mean, especially at the beginning, I felt a strong mistrust toward [staff] I was used to considering the managing agency as the first to be complicit with the established power [*potere costituito*]. But then, while you're working there, you also come to realize that if there were no people like the manager, the social worker . . . many things would not have been done. (Female rights advocate)

While describing their experience within Ponte Galeria, many participants, especially rights advocates, also expressed concerns about their indirect complicity with the operation of the detention system itself (Briskman, Zion, and Loff 2012; Essex 2014; Kotsioni 2016). Such concerns were reinforced by the fact that their choice of “getting in” was criticized by some anti-detention activists, who regarded entry as legitimizing these institutions. This situation placed an extra burden on rights advocates, as one interviewee explained:

There are also those who advocate the CIE is a reality that needs be fought from the outside because when you get in, you are somehow legitimating, and by legitimating it . . . you keep the show going on In the days I used to go to the center, once I went back home, [I felt] burdened by what I had seen, by the climate of tension I had breathed, by the people I had talked to, by the suffering I had seen and . . . moreover, I had to deal with the fact that someone would think what I was doing was not even right. (Female rights advocate)

As a result of these tensions, a sense of powerlessness and frustration was often mentioned. Like center staff, external actors complained about their lack of power to shape detention conditions and effectively influence detainees' situation. In particular, some rights advocates spoke about the frustration of not being able to help all detainees by blocking their deportation and making them free. Due to their limited time and resources, their support benefited only a small number of people confined. As a consequence, they had to deal with the unpleasant task of deciding which cases to prioritize, even within a designated target group (e.g., asylum seekers or victims of gender violence). This “responsibility,” which also implied the constant (re)drawing of a line between “deserving” and “undeserving” subjects (Kalir and Wissink 2016), ultimately gave these actors an arbitrary power over detainees' lives (Agier 2011). The messiness of their work, and the uneasy emotions associated with it, were at times so strong as to make it difficult for external actors to leave the burden behind the center's gates:

It is really difficult to position yourself in sites like these. It is also difficult to go out and say, “OK, now I'm going to do something else” I mean, when I go, I try to stay there not more than three hours and . . . when I get out, I mean, I'm a bit messy because you've been You can't possibly understand . . . the social dynamics of where you've been for those three hours. (Female rights advocate)

To navigate these challenges, participants relied on a variety of strategies. First, they mentioned the importance of establishing collaboration among different actors, such as rights advocates, lawyers, journalists, activists, and, at times, political representatives, with the goal of more effectively securing detainees' rights. Moreover, many participants highlighted the importance of focusing their efforts on the identification of "vulnerable cases." The focus on categories of people labeled as "vulnerable" by the state (e.g., asylum seekers or trafficking survivors), for whom specific provisions and forms of protection existed, allowed these actors to achieve concrete results and to help some people by contributing to their release into the community. These results, although limited, were often described as major sources of inspiration for professionals to continue their activities. However, in the case of rights advocates, these successes had to be complemented with initiatives to raise awareness about the overall "pains of detention" and to advocate for policy change (see the first quote in this section).

As this section has shown, both groups of professional actors faced a range of challenges in carrying out their activities and developed various strategies to navigate these challenges and make sense of their experiences within the detention system. In the process, how center staff and external civil-society actors approached and understood their work also impacted their relationships with those most directly affected by this form of border control, namely, detainees.

Relationship with Detainees

This section examines the relationship that center staff and external civil-society actors formed with illegalized migrants detained inside Ponte Galeria. Both groups of actors spent considerable time in detention and established personal bonds with those confined. Therefore, in their accounts, these protagonists discussed the implications, tensions, and challenges navigated in the context of these relationships, which were profoundly shaped by the humanitarian-securitarian logic impregnating the center. Yet, their narratives also illustrate the role played by other factors, particularly hegemonic representations of migration and citizenship conveyed by Italian media and public discourses as well as the center's tangible characteristics. These factors collectively impacted daily interactions between professionals and detainees and shaped the way professional actors emotionally symbolized¹³ detainees and their relationship with them. Notably, these symbolizations, which were also informed by gendered and racialized views about detainees' behavior, ultimately defined, on the one hand, those deserving this form of confinement and,

¹³ The term 'emotional symbolizations' refers to the emotional meanings attributed by people to the differing aspects of reality to which they relate, including how they relate to others who share the same context (Carli and Paniccio 2003).

on the other, those deemed worthy of professionals’—and the state’s—benevolence and compassion.

Center Staff

Centre staff spent significant time in the detention center and interacted with detainees on a daily basis. Thus, for these workers, their relationships with detainees were a major topic of discussion. In particular, their accounts showed how their perceptions of and interactions with detainees were influenced by hegemonic discourses on migration and citizenship (Bosworth and Slade 2014; Hiemstra 2014), as well as by the construction of the detention space itself (Gill 2009; Enjolras 2010; Kynsilehto and Puumala 2017).

As Essex (2014) notes, institutional and media debates have strong impacts on representations and everyday practices of professionals working in the detention field, who, as members of the general public, are exposed to pervasive discourses that construct migrants as “dangerous others” (Hall 2010; Hiemstra 2014). For instance, Beneduce and Martelli (2005) highlight the role played by Italian media in fostering a narrative of migrants as “clandestine-criminals.” This narrative, entangling with other material and discursive devices, circulates and sticks to particular racialized and gendered bodies, making them appear to be monstrous and fearsome (Giuliani 2018). Such fear was a main pivot on which the detention machine, as well as the detention staff’s emotional engagement, rested. Significant in this regard are the words of a staff worker who, discussing the detention system and its legitimacy, described migrants in Italy as mostly criminals or potential terrorists; in both cases a “threat” to society:

There is this security problem One who got out of jail, a foreigner, or the criminals who’re around here, they’re too many I mean if there were not such people, these criminals and everything, for me we could even shut down [detention centers]. We could live safely without any fear, without any worry. But nowadays, regarding what is happening now, I would say that I agree that they identify dangerous people. [Researcher: what is happening, you mean, terrorism?] Yes, terrorism, then Let’s say that there are people in the street who are really criminals. (Male staff worker)

The emotional symbolization of detainees as threatening and fearsome bodies was upheld and reinforced by Ponte Galeria’s layout. Architecturally, it resembled a prison, composed of several buildings surrounded by high walls and fences and with CCTV cameras in all areas (MEDU 2012; Esposito et al. 2019). This construction of the center as a prison-like environment impacted the relationship between detainees and staff (Bosworth and Slade 2014, Gill 2009). As a staff member, a female psychologist, vividly explained, “Us [staff] with the uniforms all on one side, they even eh, in the canteen, right? You’re in the canteen with all those bars, with all those things. It really seems like that over there, there are ani[mals] . . . lions.” In

particular, and as illustrated by this interviewee's quote, the center's spatial organization and architecture enhanced the perception of migrants' dangerousness, while also fostering staff recourse to a zoological—and thus dehumanizing—imagination (the center as a site to hold “potentially violent animals”) (for a discussion on this point, see Fanon 1961). In doing so, the facility's tangible characteristics exacerbated the division between staff and detainees, reflecting the sovereign distinction between citizens and non-citizens, and generated a general climate of hyper-vigilance and suspicion (e.g., Hall 2010).

According to Carli and Paniccia (2003), suspicion is the emotion on which control, as a specific form of social relationship, is based. Therefore, it does not sound strange that inside Ponte Galeria, a highly controlled environment designed to contain “threatening bodies” during their identification and (ideally) removal from state territory, suspicion was a prevailing emotion in staff-detainee interactions. Some staff members highlighted that, since they were the only institutional actors detainees met on a day-to-day basis (immigration officers were located in a separate area of the center), they were often regarded as “jailers,” the ones who wanted to keep detainees locked up. For instance, the female psychologist recalled an episode in which a detained man, addressing a staff worker, shouted: “Ah, but you're all mad at us, you are happy [that we are confined] —like—you would burn us!” Additionally, the legal adviser we interviewed explained that sometimes, especially in the case of women, detainees even suspected that staff members were police officers or collaborated with the police. In all cases, the result was that staff at times felt that detainees did not acknowledge the humanitarian value of their work and displayed a degree of skepticism about their attempts to help.

As a consequence of this complex scenario, imbued with tension and mistrust, staff members often perceived the detention environment as unsafe and experienced insecurity and fear in performing their activities (Hiemstra 2014; Puthooppambil, Ahlberg, and Bjerneld 2015). In particular, aware of detainees' stress from being confined, they felt the risk of unpleasant things, such as physical assaults (Hall 2010; Puthooppambil, Ahlberg, and Bjerneld 2015; Fischer 2015). Concerns for personal safety were amplified by a lack of training to manage tension filled situations, as well as by the perception of security corps intervention as untimely. Particularly stressful were situations in which decisions on immigration cases were to be communicated to detainees, for instance in cases of deportation. Although such decisions were made elsewhere by immigration officers and judges, staff members had to deal with their consequences:

There's the staff worker that gets in alone to call [detainees] for [meeting] the lawyer, that gets in [to call them] for the canteen, that gets in for... for any service. [Researcher: Does he get in in case of deportation, too?] He gets in, right, to call people in case of deportation.... And the roommates of the deported one, those who remain, they would see that you're the rat that went inside to call the person to be deported, you know what I mean? [threatening tone]. (Female legal advisor)

This situation was compounded by the fact that detainees put in place a variety of strategies to contest and challenge the detention machine, and the order on which it rested, as we witnessed during fieldwork. These strategies ranged from claims to be recognized as having rights to non-compliance with detention rules to self-harm, riots, and escapes (Esposito et al. 2019). In this context, conflicts sometimes occurred with staff members, as they were the ones in charge of maintaining the center's discipline regime. As a staff worker told us:

They [detainees] want something [indicates the water], and they come to you, and if you tell them no, then they go to someone else, someone else, someone else, someone else, and then, after they've gone around and everybody has told them no, they come back to you and they do so [imitates the gesture of standing with the arms crossed on the chest] And you're there, and you know you cannot give it . . . because it's the rule! Some understand, while others treat you badly, they start treating you with P and they end up with M [*pezzo di merda*, piece of shit]! If they make them busy, like children, they would not always think about hurting themselves or hurting others! (Field notes, September 3, 2014)

As the quote shows, from their side, center staff often interpreted these behaviors, such as detainees' persisting demands and claims, as signs of their personal immaturity and incapacity to tolerate frustration. In doing so, they rearticulated a patronizing vision of detained migrants as infantilized others, constructing them as people with child-like behaviors (on infantilization as a power mechanism to dominate subjugated populations, see Fanon 1961; Goffman 1961).

In spite of this climate of stress and anxiety, emotions such as sympathy and compassion were nonetheless able to bloom in the detention context. Such emotions mainly relied on staff's capacity to feel empathy and mutuality. For instance, on certain occasions, staff members acknowledged the injustice suffered by detainees and developed deep emotional connections with them. An episode that took place in September 2015 is especially telling. The center was filled with Nigerian women, many of whom had been transported directly from Sicily, where they had landed after grueling trips across Niger and Libya. A female staff worker approached the researcher privately, expressing her concerns for a young detainee whose case she had very much taken to her heart. Willing to help the girl at all costs and to prevent her deportation, the worker asked the researcher what she could do, explaining that she was ready to be her guarantor or even adopt the girl (Field notes, September 14, 2015).

This and other episodes witnessed during fieldwork, on the one hand, revealed the hardness and complexity characterizing detention staff's work but, on the other hand, showed the intimacy of the relationships that could be established between the staff member and the detainees. Such relationships, relying on the acknowledgment of a common humanity and vulnerability, could sometimes defy the dehumanizing order on which the detention system is otherwise based (Hall 2010):

I started to say, “Well, do not ever try to trick those people And be close to them, take them as your brothers because the people they take to the CIE are the same people who live in your building, are the people you meet in the street.” And there I reflected, I said: those who created these laws never see the *guests* [detainees] in the middle of the road. We are the ones who meet them, so you have to behave toward them in a way that . . . to someone I also left my phone number while he/she was leaving the CIE, even if it is forbidden Let’s take a coffee [outside] because we are all brothers. (Male staff worker)

Empathy and compassion, however, were not equally distributed among all detainees. While interviewees declared that it was relatively easy to establish emotional connections with women, they saw this connection as much more difficult to create with men, particularly those with criminal backgrounds. The distinction between “good” and “bad” migrants, “victims,” and “dangerous” subjects, with the latter deserving detention, was constantly reproduced in staff narratives (see also Esposito and Kellezi 2020). Such a distinction was clearly gendered. “They [the police] bring us [at Ponte Galeria] domestic servants [*badanti*] that don’t bother anyone; instead, they do socially useful jobs,” a social worker angrily explained to the researcher. “It’s full of [migrant] people who commit crimes in Italy, bring them in!” This verbal interaction took place following an interview with a Colombian woman, who had just been taken to Ponte Galeria by the police, after working for years as a domestic servant in Italy. Venting her frustration for the Italian immigration system’s unfairness, the social worker continued: “Eastern women [at Ponte Galeria] are all domestic servants! All men [come] from prison! And then, maybe, after six months here [at Ponte Galeria], they [the men] manage to get out [being released in the community], whereas the women are deported!” (Field notes, March 19, 2014).

Such episodes reveal how staff members generally regarded women as “harmless victims” of the system, unjustly locked up and, therefore, deserving of greater empathy. However, exceptions were made, particularly in the case of women who had a criminal background or who used to make their living as sex workers. These women did not fit into the normative category of “victim,” and challenged hegemonic notions of femininity. Center staff also regarded the vast majority of male detainees as criminals, using nationality as a proxy to articulate such stereotypical divisions in a racialized way (see also Bosworth 2014). “Albanians often commit violent offenses,” a female board member commented, “while North Africans [she referred particularly to Tunisians] are involved in drug crimes” (Field notes, March 14, 2014). Overall, detainees from the Maghreb were considered the most troublesome and the most inclined to manipulate staff and create problems. In particular, female staff complained about their sexist attitudes. Conversely, detainees from Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Senegal and Nigeria), which center staff understood to essentially mean “Black bodies,” were described as being more respectful to women. “They use to call us ‘mom’,” a female staff worker commented (Field notes, March 16, 2014). Indians, Bangladeshis and, above all, Chinese were perceived as quiet and

disciplined people, even if very closed in their communities. Having limited interactions with them, staff members often had trouble in remembering their names, resorting to calling them by the name of their country (e.g., “China”).¹⁴

It is worth mentioning that, in this overall scenario, a particular case was that of foreign national staff members. For this group, emotional connections with detainees were stronger on the basis of their common experience as migrants and non-citizens. “I’m a foreigner, I feel in the skin how you [detainees] feel!” commented a male cultural mediator from Congo while speaking with detainees about the harsh conditions inside Ponte Galeria (Field notes, March 18, 2014). Such closeness was even deeper when detainees and staff members shared the same nationality, religion, or mother tongue. Nevertheless, in the case of these actors also, a distinction between migrants with and without criminal background emerged in their accounts:

I put myself in their shoes, but with some people I don’t. Because I say that someone who came out of prison, paid for it and everything, and is still paying, I don’t put myself in their shoes But someone who came out, was stopped in the street, without documents, arrives here. I put myself in their shoes, because I am an immigrant too . . . and I try to be closer. (Male staff worker)

This distinction ultimately served to define those with whom foreign staff members could identify and, in turn, those who were deemed worthy of their benevolence. Yet this distinction, which emerged for all staff members, regardless of nationality, was primarily a moral, not a legal, one. By purporting to separate the “innocent” from the “guilty”, the “deserving” from the “undeserving”, staff relied on an understanding of migrants’ behavior as determined solely by individual choices, regardless of structural processes and histories of inequality. This framing ultimately reveals the salience of an individual-centered moral logic in center staff’s understandings of, and everyday interactions with, detainees: a logic that, as Ticktin argues, “careens between identifying with the victim to making her/him into a distant and barbaric other” (Ticktin 2016, p. 259).

External Civil-society Actors

Despite the empathy and solidarity signifying the relationship between detainees and external civil-society actors, the distinction between people with or without a criminal background emerged in these participants’ accounts as well. Just like staff members, many external actors mentioned the difficulty in building empathetic relationships with ex-prisoners, especially those who had committed “serious

¹⁴See also Giuliani (2018) on the gendered/sexualized “figures of race” that compose the symbolic material of (post)colonial imaginaries of (white) Italianness and (racialized) Otherness.

crimes” (e.g., pedophilia or rape). Also, some participants considered ex-prisoners the only group ideally deserving deportation, even when they showed progressive views about border control:

I like thinking about the recognition of the right of free movement and residence anywhere, so I’m also against the very notion of repatriation However, I met people [in Ponte Galeria] who had committed very serious crimes, so . . . if you, state, for security reasons, you want to . . . secure the repatriation of a person who committed serious crimes in your country, let’s say that maybe it’s the only form of . . . deportation I conceive, that, however, should not be enforced through the CIE. (Female rights advocate)

In general, external professionals, like staff members, struggled to find a balance between distance and proximity in their relationships with detainees. Affective involvement proved to be particularly strong in their case, likely due to their “external” and “independent” roles in the center’s day-to-day management. In particular, all external actors emphasized detention’s dehumanizing nature, pointing out how detainees were stripped of their singularity and transformed into “object bodies.” This dehumanization and its related pains were especially emphasized in relation to women, whom external actors (similarly to staff members) frequently portrayed as “unjust victims” of the system. To do so, they also relied on dominant ideas of femininity (Esposito et al., 2019). For instance, in one interview, a member of a religious congregation recounted the personal impact of her experience entering Ponte Galeria’s women’s living unit:

At the beginning it was really quite depressing, in the sense that [inside Ponte Galeria] I see how the resources of nations are really being wasted, because, for us, in Nigeria, a woman is a precious thing [*una cosa preziosa*] . . . a woman is like the one who supports the family, in the sense that she knows how to coordinate between her husband and children, so she really plays a role. (Female religious volunteer)

Overall, and despite rights advocates displaying a more critical and empowering attitude in their relationship with those confined than did faith-based and religious volunteers, the brutalization that detention caused to women’s bodies unequivocally emerged as especially hard to bear for all external actors. In particular, many interviewees complained about the neglectful treatment provided to women detainees and a perceived lack of concern with their basic care and dignity. In this light, participants again highlighted gender’s relevance in shaping their understanding of everyday life in detention and in their relationship with detainees:

I experience great difficulty entering the female living unit because it elicits more emotions in me It also strikes me, for example, to see women . . . neglected, with

underwear that may not have been chosen by them and coming from who knows where.
(Female human rights advocate)

The relation between external actors and men detainees was complicated as well, although for different reasons. Many participants reported experiencing difficulties when reaching out to detained men, in part because police often raised issues of personal safety to prevent external actors', especially women professionals', entry inside the men's living unit (see also Esposito 2017). As a result, rights advocates and volunteers had to meet detainees individually, in a separate space outside the living unit (usually an office located in the service area).¹⁵ During these meetings, in which detainees shared with these professional actors the suffering related to confinement and the abuses they experienced or witnessed, close relationships could, however, be forged. In some cases, participants' relationships with detainees went beyond the gates of Ponte Galeria and entailed external actors' engagement with a multiplicity of interlocutors and detainees' close acquaintances. As the lawyer we interviewed explained:

Eh . . . for S. [a detainee he assisted] I committed myself in a way that clearly transcends the one of a lawyer. Because . . . I made contact with his sister, and . . . I also made contact with other organizations as they were supporting him anyway. (Male lawyer)

Because external civil-society actors were often the only ones entering the facility, apart from center staff and police officers, they felt as if they were among the few allies with whom detainees could share their plight and struggles. However, this role, and the intimate connections that could be developed within these relationships, was not always easy to handle. Indeed, many participants highlighted the burden of being close to people facing conditions of hardship and suffering, while also managing detainees' expectations and the responsibility that their enforced vulnerability placed upon them:

This is a relationship with people who suffer, I mean, it was not easy, because they were people . . . experiencing intense deprivation, so they would see great responsibility in you, they would give you great responsibility. And . . . and it was not easy. (Female human rights advocate)

Yet while in some cases detainees' vulnerability was a source of concern in terms of professionals' capacity to intervene and establish a meaningful and supportive relationship, in others it could be exploited for personal interest. For instance, most participants reported that many lawyers, with the exception of those who understood their work as a political engagement (as did our participant), did not invest sufficient

¹⁵ In the case of women detainees, female professionals were allowed to enter the living unit.

time and energy in detainees' cases. These lawyers tended to convey partial or inadequate information to detainees, accepting money from them in exchange for unrealistic expectations of release. This practice was considered a major issue by interviewees, who pointed out how, in Ponte Galeria's opaque and unfathomable environment, lawyers assisting detainees had much opportunity to abuse their power (see also Esposito et al. 2019). Additionally, evidence of such abuses rarely escaped the institution's walls, except through the efforts of external civil-society actors, especially rights advocates, in the few cases where they had access to such information, further highlighting the complexity of building, maintaining, or guaranteeing genuinely supportive bonds in sites that are structurally framed by asymmetrical power positions (i.e., legal citizen vs. illegalized non-citizens).

Conclusion and Discussion

The tension between humanity and security, care and control, and compassion and repression has become a crucial feature in the "global management" of people on the move (Barnett 2001; Agier 2011; Titchin 2011, 2016; Fassin 2012; Aas and Gundhus 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015). Aiming to explore this tension in the context of migration-related detention, a fast-growing, yet inadequately studied area of academic interest (c.f., Cadeddu 2013; Campesi 2015; Fisher 2015), this article has drawn on empirical findings collected inside Rome's Ponte Galeria detention center, the largest Italian detention facility.

Currently, there is little empirical knowledge about life inside migration-related detention centers, primarily due to the difficulties in gaining access to these highly politicized and contested sites (Bosworth 2014). Therefore, by presenting the results of this long-term ethnographic study, this article expands on the existing knowledge on this topic, which has typically been characterized by bird's-eye research perspectives and studies based on brief site visits or interviews conducted outside detention facilities (Bosworth and Kellezi 2017). In particular, our approach generates a deeper understanding of the detention system's operations through sustained engagement with first-hand experiences of professional nonstate actors partaking in these institutions. More specifically, as one of the few studies on migration-related detention in Italy (c.f., Iyengar et al. 2012; Campesi 2015), a country whose detention policies and management paradigm have been consistently characterized by the entanglement of security and humanitarian logics (Campesi, 2015), this article shows the pitfalls of a humanitarian approach to detention (and to border control more generally) and its inefficacy in challenging the structural roots of these oppressive institutions. In doing so, our contributions stand at odds with previous scholarship supporting the radical potential of creating more humane and compassionate staff-detainee relationships and the transformative effect of these microscale changes to daily practices and interactions on the detention system itself (e.g., Hall 2010; Hiemstra 2014).

All professional nonstate actors who participated in this study described the paradoxes, conflicts, and dilemmas of intervening inside this hostile environment, while also trying to support those confined within it. Additionally, they highlighted the burden of this choice on their everyday professional lives. This burden was especially onerous for staff members, whose accounts revealed the jarring tensions that they navigated between “control” and “assistance”, “surveillance” and “care”, and “repression” and “protection.” Through their ambiguous role of providing humane assistance to people confined while awaiting expulsion, life in detention was “fraught and contradictory” for these workers (Hall 2010, p. 894). Unable to decisively shape the detention system’s operations, staff members ultimately normalized the violence of such a system and worked to discipline detainees’ gendered and racialized bodies. This reality, concealed behind a discourse guided by thoughts that “Yes, but somebody has to help them, somehow” (female board member), contradicted center staff’s stated humanitarian mission and strained their professional identities.

The situation for external civil-society actors was different, even if commonalities with staff members existed. The decision to enter these institutions was often ideologically unsettling, especially for rights advocates, who wondered whether their presence at such an oppressive site could produce a positive impact or was just a useless act of complicity. The central question that was more or less explicitly voiced in their accounts was whether to counter the system from the inside or to criticize it from the outside. This question had no easy answer, as it was their presence on the ground that allowed these actors to make a difference in the lives of those affected by detention. In doing so, however, they had to bear the task of selecting who did and did not “deserve” their help and, thus, ultimately ended up reproducing the dominant moral logics and fragmentations they sought to challenge (see Kalir and Wissink 2016).

These tensions, and the overall tight constraints that characterize such a custodial and restrictive context, impacted everyday life inside the center and the relationships built with detainees. In a general climate of mistrust and anxiety, upheld by hegemonic representations connecting migration to dangers to public order and security, detainees were dichotomously conceived by staff members, and at times even by external actors, as “good” or “bad” migrants, “victims” or “criminals”, and “undeserving” or “deserving” of detention and deportation (Esposito and Kellezi 2020). Notably, these distinctions depended primarily on staff’s individual sensibilities, which, in turn, were shaped by racialized and gendered ideas of who was (or was not) a subject worthy of compassion. While women were usually regarded as victims of the immigration enforcement system, unjustly locked up and brutalized, men detainees were often viewed as more dangerous and troublesome. On the whole, though, the distinction that most frequently arose in participants’ narratives concerned differences between detainees with and without criminal backgrounds. This recourse to a binary framework demonstrates how (gendered and racialized) notions of vulnerability and dangerousness shaped the continuous (re)drawing of the line

between “deserving” and “undeserving” subjects in detention and ultimately focused on individuals and their choices, rather than on the structural realities that contoured their lives.

Yet, as Feldman (2016) rightfully notes, even people endowed with the power of sovereign violence are not passive cogs in larger machines of power but, rather, struggle to make sense of their actions and assign them ethical meaning. As such, from their multiple, ambiguous, and often-contradictory positions, both the staff employed by managing agencies, and the external actors that we interviewed struggled to reconcile their personal ethical beliefs with their limited room for action, while also building bridges with detainees with whom they felt emotional connections. Grounded in the acknowledgment of a common humanity and vulnerability, these relationships allowed empathy and compassion to bloom in a detention setting. In doing so, these relationships also temporarily subverted the division between citizens (professionals) and non-citizens (detainees) on which detention rests, while challenging the feelings of suspicion and fear that nourish this divide. Yet, taken alone, these circumstances did not trigger any transformative change in the detention system, as they were largely based on individual moral conceptions and sentiments. Put differently, these affective bonds were forged in a context that was *structurally* framed by power asymmetries that precluded transformation through *individually* based efforts. As a result, and, as their accounts reveal, while staff and external actors were empathetic witnesses to detainees’ plight, members of both groups were repeatedly (although differently) beset by feelings of powerlessness and frustration over their inability to enact substantive alterations to the detention and deportation system. This situation placed a great burden on these actors, especially staff members, who were usually sent into the field without previous training, adequate resources, and/or psychological supervision. Thus, their frontline exposure to the pains of detention ultimately caused them severe distress and put them at risk for exhaustion.

This observation, made at the end of our journey into the intricacies of life inside Italy’s largest detention facility, brings us to some concluding thoughts. Analyzing the experiences of health professionals working in Australian detention facilities, Birsman, Zion, and Loff (2012) argued that neither “benevolent defiance” nor “empathic care” is effective in challenging the reality of migration-related detention. Our findings confirm this claim, going a step further to demonstrate humanitarianism’s insidious effects in detention settings characterized by the social legitimization and normalization of this form of state-sponsored violence and the high psychological costs for humanitarian actors on the front line. Based on these considerations, and the overall results of our study, we assert that “humanizing detention” cannot be a solution for change on its own. While creating empathy with those who are dehumanized and oppressed by the system (i.e., detainees) can be a first, and certainly a necessary step, transformative change will only become possible when direct and individual actions are articulated with a broader understanding of, and an ability to impact on, the political and structural conditions that allow for these

sites to exist (as a rights advocate we interviewed clearly put forward, see p. 12). Any humanitarian action in a detention setting that is not complemented by a quest for rights and structural justice and a political analysis framed by advocacy is, therefore, ultimately destined to legitimize this system and perpetuate the fragmentations, power inequalities, and colonial legacies in which it is grounded. Furthermore, as long as decision-making power is held by immigration officers and judges, the humanitarian actors called to manage daily life in these settings will be unable to enact change and, inevitably, forced into deeply unsettling acts of collusion with an inherently violent institution.

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